On June 14, 2007, the sudden civil war between the opposing Hamas and Fatah parties in Palestine reached a climax. The newly elected Islamist Palestinian group Hamas took over the headquarters of the Western-backed Fatah’s Preventive Security forces in Gaza City. As Hamas forces consolidated control over Gaza, the Palestinian territory was split in two, with Hamas controlling the coastal Gaza strip and Fatah ruling the West Bank.

President George W. Bush announced on July 16 an initiative to shore up the Palestinian president and begin building a Palestinian state, highlighting his Administration’s desire to use its remaining months to make a major push for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. He proposed a U.S.-led international conference to take place in the fall to resolve the outstanding issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Playing a central role in the conference would be the Quartet, composed of the U.S., the United Nations, Russia and the European Union. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently was named special envoy to the Quartet. The conference would also include Arab envoys and their counterparts from Israel and the Palestinian West Bank. Viewed by both Israel and the U.S. as a terrorist group, Hamas would be excluded from the meeting. A Hamas spokesman countered by saying Mr. Bush’s comments were “a new crusade by Bush against the Palestinian people” and urged the Arab world to confront Mr. Bush’s initiative. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will chair the conference.

Showcasing the U.S. intent to bolster the leadership of Fatah, Ms. Rice has signed an agreement giving the Palestinian Authority (PA) $80 million to reform its security services. The money is part of the U.S. plan to sell billions of dollars worth of weapons to the Middle East to shore up friendly regimes against al-Qaeda and Iran. She stated, “We are working with these states to fight back extremism.” The package includes a 25% increase in arms sales to Israel, totaling $30 billion, over the next 10 years, which will ensure that Israel maintains its military superiority in the
region. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates are to share $20 billion, while Egypt will receive $13 billion.

On August 6, 2007, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud met for the first time. The three-hour meeting, held in the Palestinian city of Jericho, focused on what Mr. Olmert described as “fundamental issues that are the basis for the establishment of a Palestinian state.” However, Israel made it clear that it is not ready to start negotiating the details of an actual agreement. The last time an Israeli prime minister entered PA territory was in May 2000 when Israel’s Ehud Barak met with former Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. Hamas dismissed the Olmert-Abbas meeting as going against Palestinian interests.

Mr. Abbas has said he would welcome Russian mediation attempts to heal the rift between the rival Fatah and Hamas movements and even traveled to Moscow to urge Russia involvement in Middle East diplomacy. Russia is the only member of the Quartet that maintains contact with Hamas. In bilateral talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov gave his full backing to Mr. Abbas, stating “We firmly support you as leader of the entire Palestinian people.”

In early August, Iran’s vice-president, Parviz Davoodi, stated that any effort by his country to help improve security in Iraq depends on the withdrawal of U.S.-led forces and an end to U.S. interference in the country. His comments came at the end of two days of talks between senior Iranian officials and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Malaki. While Iraqi officials have said that Mr. Malaki will be seeking further cooperation from Iran in helping to quell the violence in Iraq, U.S. commanders have repeatedly accused Iran of training and arming sectarian militias in Iraq, which Tehran denies.

In regard to the war in Iraq, President Bush continued in early July to reiterate his “stay the course” message. He also stated that the Iraqis must take more responsibility. At the same time, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Ryan C. Crocker, and the Iraqi foreign minister were warning that the departure of American troops could lead to sharply increased violence, the deaths of thousands and a regional conflict that could draw in Iraq’s neighbors. Mr. Crocker used the metaphor of a film reel in his description of the situation in Iraq: “In the States, it’s like we’re in the last half of the third reel of a three-reel movie, and all we have to do is decide we’re done here, and the credits come up, and the lights come on, and we leave the theater and go on to something else. Whereas out here, you’re just getting into the first reel of five reels and as ugly as the first reel has been, the other four and a half are going to be way, way worse.”

Pretty much supporting Mr. Crocker’s argument is the Initial Benchmark Assessment Report, released July 12, 2007, which evaluated progress on how the Iraqi government is performing on 18 specified benchmarks.

On July 24, 2007, the Joint Campaign Plan, an elaboration of the new strategy President Bush had signaled in January, was released. It represents the coordinated strategy of the top American commander, Gen. David H. Patraeus, and Ambassador Crocker, calling for the restoring of security in local areas, including Baghdad, by the summer of 2008 and the establishment of “sustainable security” on a nationwide basis by the summer of 2009. The plan does not explicitly address troop levels or withdrawal schedules. General Patraeus and Mr. Crocker will provide an assessment in September 2007 on trends in Iraq and whether President Bush’s surge strategy is viable or needs to be changed.

On August 2, 2007, the biggest Sunni Arab bloc, the Accordance Front, triggered what Kurdish Prime Minister Barham Salih called the worst political crisis since Iraq’s new constitution was adopted by pulling out of Prime Minister Maliki’s Shi’i government. Bringing Sunni Arabs into the government had been billed as a major step toward reconciliation when the cabinet was formed last year, but Sunnis have complained that they were marginalized and that key laws demanded by Washington have never been passed.

The Guardian Unlimited reported that U.S. officials stated on May 22, 2007, that Iran had been secretly forging ties with al-Qaeda and Sunni Arab militias in Iraq in preparation for a show-
down with coalition forces with the intention of tipping a waiving U.S. Congress into voting for a full military withdrawal. A senior U.S. official in Baghdad warned that Iran is “behind a lot of high-profile attacks meant to undermine U.S. will and British will” and that “the relationships between Iran and groups like al-Qaeda are very fluid.” Iran has maintained close ties to Iraq’s Shi’i political parties and militias but has previously denied collaboration with al-Qaeda and Sunni insurgents. U.S. officials also state that in a parallel development, the U.S. has proof that Iran has reversed its previous policy in Afghanistan and is now supporting and supplying the Taliban’s campaign against U.S., British and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces.

Several British officers have recently criticized the high level of civilian casualties resulting from operations performed by the American Special Forces fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan as undermining and turning the Afghan people against any foreign presence. Although the exact number of civilian deaths is unknown, The New York Times states that a reliable source claims that close to 300 civilians have been killed so far this year in Helmand Province and that the vast majority of these deaths were a result of foreign forces, not the Taliban. An American military spokesman denied that U.S. military forces had caused most of the casualties.

The Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and the most influential political opposition in the country, announced on August 1, 2007, that it had withdrawn from nationwide municipal council elections, according to The Times. Jordan has long tried to engage and co-opt the Islamic opposition group, while making sure it does not score any political gains. The group cited voting irregularities and said “the level of corruption...made impossible for us to continue with this election.” Marouf al-Bakhit, Jordan’s prime minister, said the Islamic Action Front’s withdrawal was illegal because it violated rules defining the time frame for quitting an election.

Topic 2/Climate change and global warming

On May 31, 2007, in advance of the G-8 Summit of the world’s largest economic powers, President George W. Bush called for the 15 countries producing the major amount of greenhouse gases to confer this fall on developing a new framework on greenhouse emissions to take effect when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. President Bush stated, “By the end of next year, America and other nations will set a long-term global goal for reducing greenhouse gases.” He advocates that midterm national targets should be implemented via programs reflecting each country’s specific mix of energy sources and future needs. President Bush’s initiative is significant, since his remarks appeared to represent the first time he has said the U.S. should set itself a specific goal for lowering emissions. However, his proposal has been criticized as being merely a charade to improve his standing before the G-8 Summit, which comes on the heels of the U.S. rejection of Germany’s proposal, endorsed by both Britain and Japan, for deep long-term cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

The annual G-8 Summit of the U.S., Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan and Italy was held in Heiligendamm, Germany, the week of June 8. Excerpts of the summit’s summary of agreements on climate change, energy efficiency and energy security state “combating climate change is one of the major challenges for mankind” and “we will consider seriously the decisions made by the European Union, Canada and Japan, which include at least a halving of global emissions by 2050.” The G-8 members concur that the UN Climate Change Conference to be held in Indonesia in December 2007 will serve to achieve a comprehensive post-Kyoto agreement to include all major emitters. President Bush has made it clear that U.S. involvement depends on India and China being included in any agreement.
Currently those two nations are excluded from the restrictions of the Kyoto Protocol that place caps on carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases because of their status as developing countries. The failure to include China in the treaty was the main reason given by the U.S. for its refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. While the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Angela Merkel described the final deal proposed by the G-8 Summit as “very substantial” and a “huge step forward,” newly elected French president Nicolas Sarkozy was unenthusiastic, stating “We could have done better.”

On June 19, 2007, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency announced China had overtaken the U.S. as the world’s biggest producer of carbon dioxide. In 2006, China produced 6.2 billion metric tons of CO2 while the U.S. produced 5.8 billion. These figures represent a 9% increase in China’s CO2 emissions in 2006 and only a 1.4% increase in the U.S. CO2 emissions, which analysts attribute to a slowing U.S. economy. China’s per capita pollution remains relatively low as the average Chinese emitted a mere 3.5 tons of CO2 last year, while Americans emitted some 20 tons; the average American pollutes 5 to 6 times more than the average Chinese. It is important to note that the new figures only include CO2 emissions from fossil fuel burning and cement production. China is heavily dependent on coal, which accounts for about 68% of its energy. Its cement industry, which contributes almost 9% of its CO2 emissions, produces 44% of the world supply. The assessment agency’s figures omit analysis of sources of other greenhouse gases, such as methane from agriculture and nitrous oxide from industrial processes. CO2 from the aviation and shipping industries, deforestation and underground coal fires is also excluded.

The Netherlands agency’s conclusions followed China’s June 4, 2007, announcement of its first national strategy on climate change. Beijing aims to control greenhouse gas emissions by improving energy efficiency by 20% by 2010, but rejects any mandatory caps. China also plans a major expansion of nuclear power and renewable energy sources that are expected to account for 10% of the country’s power supply by 2010. Extensive nationwide reforestation is also being implemented as a means to help absorb greenhouse gases. China continues to resist mandatory reductions in emissions with the argument that it is still a developing country and therefore needs to balance environmental improvements with maintaining economic growth. Both China and India hold that the established industrial powers need to act first, since their two countries were latecomers to industrialization and have produced only a small fraction of the world’s greenhouse gases.

**Topic 3/Mexico: Neighbor in turmoil**

In the six months since he won the highly controversial and disputed Mexican presidential election, Felipe Calderón’s main focus has been on implementing measures and policies to control extensive drug-gang violence and curb corruption within local police forces. With at least 1,400 people killed in drug-related violence in Mexico since January 2007, Calderón has ordered 24,000 soldiers and federal police to states where drug lords hold sway. Assassinations of police officials are common; top officers were recently killed in Monterrey, Tijuana and Mexico City. In response to Calderón’s strengthening assault on narcotics crime, drug gangs have grown increasingly violent, and their most popular form of protest has been the exhibition of severed human heads in several public venues. Nonetheless, Calderón is currently experiencing a relatively high approval rating of 58%.

The demand for combat-style guns is on the rise, as drug traffickers arm themselves to resist the massive military crackdown instituted by Calderón and to compete for control of trade routes into the U.S. It is nearly impossible to legally obtain a gun in Mexico. Of the 5,000 to 10,000 confiscated firearms that are run through traces in Mexico each year, more than 90% are first purchased in the U.S. The Christian Science Monitor reports that a senior Mexican official speaking on condi-
tion of anonymity says, “There is a contradiction. The U.S. says they are so worried about drug trafficking, but the U.S. is the one arming the drug traffickers.” In June, Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora called U.S. policies on guns “absurd.”

As part of the government’s effort to curb corruption, Mexico purged 284 commanders from the top ranks of its federal police forces on June 25, 2007. The New York Times quotes Genaro García Luna, the public security secretary, as stating that federal police chiefs in all 32 states were among those demoted and sent to be retrained: “We know Mexicans demand an honest, clean and trustworthy police force. It’s obvious there are mafias that are acting to keep the situation from changing, to continue enriching themselves through corruption and crime.” Officers will now face a “trust test,” which will include drug checks, a lie detector and psychological tests. Those who fail will lose their jobs, but those who get the highest marks will be promoted to regional federal police chiefs.

President Calderón has been stepping up extradition of accused drug traffickers to the U.S. As of mid-June, Calderón had shipped 21 people to this country and currently the former governor of Quintana Roo, Mario Villanueva Madrid, is in the process of being extradited. Mr. Villanueva is accused of taking millions of dollars in payoffs from the Juárez cartel in the 1990s in return for helping it ship about 200 tons of cocaine from South America through the Yucatán. If Mr. Villanueva is successfully extradited to New York City, he would be the highest-ranking former elected official from Mexico to stand trial in the U.S. on drug-trafficking charges.

President Calderón’s intention to reduce the immense power held by many of Mexico’s largest companies was voiced by Luis Téllez, Mexico’s new telecommunications and transport minister, in his attack on Cofetel, the country’s telecoms regulator. Cofetel remains largely independent of the central government and Mr. Téllez has accused it of playing more to the interests of corporate giants than to those of consumers. He is quoted in the Financial Times as saying “the regulators have been captured by the regulatees” and that Cofetel does not always “respond to the public interest.” His two main areas of concern are interconnection (the mechanism by which other operators gain access to the fixed-line network of Telmex, the sector’s dominant company) and portability (the ability of consumers to switch companies without changing their telephone number). Currently, Mexicans have to change their telephone number whenever they change carrier, a factor tending to suppress competition.

A leftist rebel group, the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), claimed responsibility for attacks in early July 2007 on the state-owned oil company, Pemex. One of the blasts forced the town of Coroneo in central Mexico to evacuate, after earlier blasts had shut down the pipeline running between Mexico City and Guadalajara. While the attacks disrupted oil supplies in Mexico, its oil exports were unaffected. According to the BBC News, the EPR posted a statement on the internet making clear that “the actions of harassment will not stop” until two jailed EPR members are released.

A report released on March 23, 2007, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that in 2006 the greatest number of asylum seekers in the world’s 50 industrialized countries were Iraqi. Iraq produced 22,200 asylum applicants, 77% over 2005. Not since 2002, prior to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, have Iraqis topped the list of asylum seekers. The substantial increase in Iraqi refugees is significant as overall applications for asylum from all nationalities decreased for the fifth straight year, with 2006 yielding 10% fewer applications than 2005. The U.S. was the main country of destination, with an estimated 51,000 people applying to enter, around 17% of all applications to industrialized countries. As a result of the UNHCR report,
a ministerial-level meeting was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in April to examine the humanitarian dimensions of the displacement crisis and to forge a common international effort to address the enormous needs.

On June 28, 2007, after roughly a month of debate, the Senate voted to effectively block the immigration reform bill—the most recent effort to massively reform U.S. immigration policy. The bill was slated to establish a path to citizenship for the roughly 12 million illegal immigrants currently in the U.S. The failure of the Senate to pass the bill halts any effort to overhaul the nation’s immigration laws. According to The New York Times, the bill would have provided $4.4 billion for border security, increased the penalties for hiring illegal immigrants, created a new guest worker program and offered legal status to millions of illegal immigrants. Although senators representing both parties announced an initial agreement on immigration-reform legislation on May 17, 2007, the bipartisan compromise collapsed on June 7, 2007, when the bill was pulled from the Senate floor. President George W. Bush extensively campaigned to revitalize the legislation, attending his first Senate Republicans’ weekly policy lunch in five years on June 12, 2007, to urge passage of the bill. The bill needed 60 votes to bring debate to an end and move it toward passage. However, the final vote found only 46 in favor, with 53 opposed.

In an effort to control illegal border crossings, the Department of Homeland Security has paid $20 million to Boeing for Project 28, a “virtual fence” scanning 28 miles of border and composed of nine 100-foot-tall towers with radar, high-definition cameras and other equipment. The cameras, set off by radar, will beam high-quality images of targets miles away to field commanders and agents. The information will flow over a high-speed wireless network to Border Patrol vehicles. If Project 28 is successful, such towers could be strung along 6,000 miles of the Mexican and Canadian borders. However, glitches with the radar and cameras slowed the project and caused it to miss its June 13, 2007, start date.

The presence of corruption in Border Patrol operations recently surfaced in an International Herald Tribune report that found three Texas National Guardsmen, serving to help prevent drug smuggling and illegal immigration, taking bribes to transport illegal immigrants into the U.S. The three guardsmen were charged on June 11, 2007, with taking $1,000 to $3,500 per trip to transport 24 undocumented aliens into the U.S. Each guard faces a maximum of 10 years in prison without parole and a fine of $250,000.

**Topic 5/ South Africa: facing new challenges**

From June 1, 2007, through June 28, 2007, South Africa experienced its largest strike since the end of apartheid in 1994. The four-week work stoppage was instituted by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), which represents 1.8 million workers, most employed by national, provincial or local governments. The over 700,000 strikers were mainly teachers, hospital workers and some government functionaries such as court orderlies and stenographers. Their absence resulted in the closing of most schools and hospitals throughout the country.

The strike began with a demand for a 12% pay raise, up from the current $700 a month salary for a beginning teacher and as little as $500 a month salary for a nurse. The government responded with an initial 6% increase, although workers argued that they would not accept anything below 10%. On June 12, 2007, over 600 public health workers on strike were fired. The BBC News reports that South Africa’s public services minister, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, stated that under the South African constitution, workers in essential services did not have the right to strike. By June 13, 2007, after the union had rejected the government’s offer of a 7.25% increase, several parallel sympathy strikes by thousands of municipal workers took place. In total, over 43 peaceful marches occurred throughout the country. On June 28, 2007, Cosatu accepted the government’s offer of a 7.5% pay
rise, officially ending the strike. BBC News reports that economists estimate the strike’s cost to South Africa’s economy may be as large as $418 million dollars.

The African National Congress (ANC), the majority and President Thabo Mbeki’s party, will hold its national conference in December, at which time the next leader of the party will be determined. The leader of the ANC plays an important role, as whoever is chosen possesses substantial political weight and has a strong chance of becoming the next president of South Africa. While President Mbeki is constitutionally banned from running as president, he has expressed keen interest in maintaining his position as ANC president, possibly to block Jacob Zuma, former South African deputy president, from ascending to both the ANC and South African presidency. The strike in June highlighted the current political atmosphere. While Cosatu is formally allied with the ANC, it has unofficially rigorously backed the populist Jacob Zuma. The strike showcased the mentality among many union members that President Mbeki has ignored and betrayed South Africa’s lower classes.

**Topic 6/War Crimes**

Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated on March 5, 2007, that his country would refuse to comply if the U.S. Congress demanded an apology for his nation’s use of foreign women as sexual slaves during World War II. The Japanese government in 1993 had issued an apology and set up a fund, due to expire in March 2007, to pay the women compensation. However, conservative scholars and the prime minister have adhered to the position that Japanese officials and soldiers did not have a role in forcing women into brothels; they place the blame instead on the contractors used by the Japanese military. While the U.S. House of Representatives considered a resolution calling on Tokyo to take more responsibility for its enslavement of an estimated 200,000 Korean and Chinese women, Mr. Abe stated that “testimony to the effect that there had been a hunt for ‘comfort women’ is a complete fabrication.”

On June 12, 2007, the UN war crimes tribunal convicted Milan Martic, a former Croatian Serb who had aided in the attempt to carve out an ethnically pure “greater Serbia” on 16 counts, including murder, torture, deportation, attacks on civilians, wanton destruction of civilian areas and other crimes against humanity. The three-judge panel found that Martic had been deeply involved in criminal plots with other Serb leaders, including Slobodan Milosevic, General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic. From 1991 to 1995 Martic had led the opposition to Croatian independence from Yugoslavia in the largely Serb Krajina region. Martic, who throughout his 13-month trial is reported to have shown no remorse, received a 35-year prison sentence.

On June 14, 2007, former UN chief and former Austrian president (1986–92) Kurt Waldheim died as a result of heart failure at the age of 88. Waldheim had been UN secretary-general from 1972 to 1981. He was barred from the U.S. for two decades for allegedly committing atrocities during World War II. Although it was never proved that Waldheim had personally committed war crimes, Yugoslav newspapers published a facsimile 1947 document showing his name on a list of German officers who took part in the infamous Mount Kozara operation, an offensive in which 68,000, 23,000 of whom were children, were said to have died. Throughout his life, Waldheim maintained his innocence.

Sierra Leone’s UN-backed war crimes tribunal issued its first verdicts against Alex Tamba Brima, Brima Kamara and Santigie Borbor Kanu on June 20, 2007. The three men were convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity during Sierra Leone’s 10-year war. The men were found guilty of 11 of the 14 charges brought against them and were to be sentenced on July 16, 2007.

Bernard Ntuyahaga, a Hutu extremist and former Rwandan army major, was sentenced on July 5, 2007, by a Belgian court to 20 years in prison for his part in the murder of 10 Belgian peacekeepers and numerous Rwandan civilians at the start of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The death of the 10 peacekeepers led to the withdrawal of
UN troops, allowing the genocide to intensify and spread. According to The Guardian Unlimited, the jury decided to award a relatively lenient penalty in hopes of maintaining an open door for reconciliation among Rwandans.

Younis Tsouli, a 23-year-old Moroccan who ran an influential internet site that distributed and showcased multimedia propaganda, was sentenced in Britain, along with two other men, to 10 years in prison on July 5, 2007. The Web site regularly featured beheadings carried out by members of al-Qaeda and served as a recruiting machine for jihadists. The Guardian Unlimited reports that the case is the first successful prosecution based entirely on the distribution of extremist material on the internet. Judge Charles Openshaw described Tsouli and his accomplices as engaging in “cyber jihad” and stated, “It would seem that internet Web sites have become an effective means of communicating such ideas.” However, Openshaw noted that despite their endorsement, the men had not carried out violent acts themselves. Referring to Tsouli, he said, “He came no closer to a bomb or a firearm than a computer keyboard.”

**Topic 7/Central Asia:** three power resource rivalry

In May the presidents of Central Asia’s main energy producers, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, joined Russian president Vladimir Putin in agreeing to build a pipeline along the Caspian Sea coast to ship Turkmen natural gas to Western markets via Kazakhstan and Russia. Turkmenistan possesses the fourth-largest reserves of natural gas in the world. Under this new agreement, Russia, the world’s No. 1 exporter of natural gas, could increase its influence by maintaining a monopoly on the transit of Turkmen and Kazakh exports to Europe. Former Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov, who died last year, had previously kept Russia at bay, instead choosing to sign deals with China to build export pipelines. The Wall Street Journal reports that the deal is a blow to the U.S. and European efforts to secure alternatives to Middle East oil and natural gas independent of Russian influence. Although the pipeline’s cost wasn’t actually announced, according to The Wall Street Journal, the ITAR-Tass news agency cited a 2003 estimate of $1 billion. The presidents have ordered their governments to sign an accord outlining the deal’s specifics by September 1, 2007. President Putin has stated that construction would begin in mid-2008.

Along with the proposed introduction of the pipeline, Turkmenistan’s President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov continues to make small efforts toward reform and changes in foreign policy. He reversed the decision of his predecessor to eliminate pensions for more than 100,000 elderly citizens and on March 22, 2007, signed into law a new Code of Social Guarantees restoring pensions and introducing new state benefits. With regard to foreign policy, after eight years of standoff, the presidents of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan held a phone conversation on March 13, 2007, and agreed to resume bilateral cooperation. Analysts believe the resumed communication could be a result of the new Turkmen leadership’s desire to explore alternative routes for exporting hydrocarbons to the West. However, the dispute over a major deposit of natural gases, which both countries claim, could hinder the relationship. The Turkmenistan president and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia signed a general cooperation agreement on April 16, 2007. The Turkmen leader described his country’s ambitions to develop a business partnership and establish strong economic ties between the two countries as “strategic.”

On March 29, 2007, the prime minister of Kyrgyzstan, Azim Isabekov, resigned and President Kurmanbek Bakiyev appointed a moderate opposition leader, Almaz Atambayev, to replace him. (This is the first time an opposition politician has been made a prime minister in Central Asia.) While the Kyrgyz government states that the appointment portrays the president’s willingness to compromise politically, critics question whether it is really a sign of a healthy democracy or instead reveals a weak government. On April 19, 2007,
some 1,500 opponents of President Bakiyev rioted, threatening to storm government headquarters. They were driven back by riot police and the opposition received a strong condemnation from President Bakiyev, who stated: “They have shown that they cannot control the people they brought to the rally…. [t]his should be stopped.” The riot echoed the clashes that led to President Bakiyev’s rise to power. Popular protests had ousted former president Askar Akayev in 2005 and swept in the current president. The political turmoil is being keenly observed by the U.S. and Russia, both of which have air bases in Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. base serves as a crucial operation as it supplies the North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops in Afghanistan and is also the last remaining U.S. military base in Central Asia.

On May 18, 2007, Kazakhstan’s parliament voted to allow President Nursultan Nazarbayev an unlimited number of terms in office. Under the current constitution, the president may only serve two terms in a row. Nazarbayev gained power in 1989 and led the country to independence in 1991. His current term ends in 2012. In what is widely seen as a move to gain legitimacy to hold the 2009 chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a major foreign policy goal for the president, Nazarbayev has dissolved parliament and called for early elections on August 18, 2007. While the original parliament term was to end in 2009, in holding the elections early, constitutional changes will be implemented immediately, including granting the president unlimited terms and giving parliament greater power. Under the new reforms, the number of members of parliament will increase from 77 to 107, effectively allowing for a greater possibility for members of the opposition to be elected. The BBC reports that despite the participation of seven different parties, Nazarbayev’s ruling party, Nur-Otan, will undoubtedly win a huge majority. However, some observers say that because of pressure from the international community, Nazarbayev might allow a greater opposition presence in parliament. The OSCE has set up an election observation mission in Kazakhstan to monitor the electoral process.

In July, Tajikistan’s parliament approved legislation that makes it a criminal offense to publish false or offensive information on the internet. The legislation has garnered criticism from human rights groups for the country’s lack of freedom of expression. Tajik media is almost entirely state-run. The president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon, announced on March 27, 2007, that he had dropped the Slavic “ov” from the end of his surname, and that henceforth, the same must be done for all babies born to Tajik parents. The Slavic ending was added to Tajik’s surnames when Tajikistan came under Soviet rule in the early 20th century.

**Topic 8/Helping the world’s endangered children**

For two weeks in March 2007, the 47 members of the United Nations Human Rights Council held a special debate on the rights of children. The council focused on a report prepared last year by the Brazilian academic and independent UN expert, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, which included general recommendations for integrating means to prevent and respond to violence against children. Pinheiro’s fundamental premise is that any violence against children is unjustifiable. The report covers cruel and humiliating punishment, genital mutilation of girls, neglect, sexual abuse, homicide and other forms of violence against children. However, it excludes any comments on children in armed conflicts. The Inter Press Service News Agency reports that what is perhaps most significant about the council’s discussions is that the members set aside their differences and gave consensus to support the conclusions presented in Pinheiro’s report.

That same month, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, visited the Central African states of Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to assess
the progress each country had made in protecting children from armed conflict. At the end of her visit to Burundi, Coomaraswamy stated, “The general situation of human rights has significantly improved in Burundi. The measures already taken by the government to address the recommendations of the Security Council are also very encouraging…. Most of the minors detained on charges related to their involvement with armed groups seem to have been released but efforts still need to be made to improve conditions of detention for minors.” Coomaraswamy’s evaluation of the DRC was less positive. She stressed the need to make child protection a priority and ensure that enough resources are allocated to reintegrate former child soldiers into their communities.

The 8th meeting of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict was held in New York City on May 10, 2007. The council demanded that specific parties in Sri Lanka and Nepal demobilize all child soldiers without delay. In a message addressed specifically to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Karuna faction, two Sri Lankan rebel groups, the council called for the cessation of child recruitment, the respect for safe zones for children, and guarantees of humanitarian access to all areas. Ms. Coomaraswamy stated: “These recommendations send a strong message to the LTTE, a repeat offender who has been on the secretary-general’s list of violators for four years and to the Karuna faction-TMVP. They have to stop grave violations of children’s rights, especially the recruitment and the use of children in the conflict in Sri Lanka.” The working group also called for the government of Nepal and the Communist party of Nepal (Maoist) to immediately release any child soldiers. “In regard to Nepal, we hope that the children…will be demobilized and reintegrated in their communities without delay,” added Ms. Coomaraswamy.

Despite increasing concern and action, the violation of children’s rights continues on a huge scale. While India has no outright ban on child labor, in October 2006, it did pass a stricter law prohibiting the employment of children under 14 in hotels and restaurants, and as domestic servants. Child advocates state that five months after the law was implemented, it had yielded little effect, specifically for underage girls who serve as maids and/or nannies. The New York Times reports that placement agencies in Delhi and Mumbai are growing exponentially. Manabendra Nath Ray of Save the Children UK is quoted as saying “it is an extremely lucrative business. This is a slave trade. Parents are, directly or indirectly, selling their children.” While data on the number of young girls working as indentured maids is unavailable, the Indian government estimates that 12 million children under 14 are employed. However, children’s rights advocates argue that the figure is probably closer to 60 million.

On June 12, 2007, six students were shot, two fatally, as they left the Qalai Sayedan School in Afghanistan. This school, considered one of the best in the central Afghan province of Logar, now has only 25% of its original 1,600 students. The shootings represented the 444th time educational institutions in Afghanistan have been attacked since last August alone. According to The New York Times, targeting educational institutions, teachers and students is a way in which the Taliban continues to make war on Afghanistan’s current government.

For the original topics, see Great Decisions 2007, a 112-page briefing book with opinion ballots on eight foreign policy issues facing the nation, prepared by the editors of the Foreign Policy Association. To order the briefing book, call toll free: (800) 477-5836. Price: $15.00 (plus S&H). Updates, which are a free service of the FPA, were written by Abigail Mahony, editorial assistant. Researched as of August 15, 2007. Updates are also available on FPA’s Web site at www.greatdecisions.org.